Marketing Letters (2022) 33:31–43
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-021-09608-1

When Less is More: Consumers Prefer Brands that Donate More in Relative versus Absolute Terms

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Accepted: 21 December 2021/ Published online: 19 January 2022

Abstract
When trying to make a good impression on consumers through charitable giving, is it better for brands to maximize the overall dollars they donate or how much they give in relative terms; for example, the proportion of profits? Across five studies we show that consumers prefer a brand that donates less in absolute dollars, if it reflects a higher proportion of profits, compared to a brand that donates more money overall, when it reflects a smaller proportion of profits. This preference emerges because consumers use the relative size of the donation as a stronger indicator of the brand's generosity than the absolute dollar amount. The effect persists even when firms make a smaller amount of money seem more generous (i.e., seem larger in relative terms) than a larger amount by condensing the timeframe of a donation.

Keywords Cause-related marketing · Charitable donations · Generosity · Altruism

1 Introduction

Companies collectively give away billions of dollars to good causes, in part to appear virtuous to consumers. For example, in 2015, Walmart donated $301 million to charity, which represented 2% of the firm's overall profits. That same year, Target donated $111.5 million, which represented 5% of its profits. Thus, while Walmart donated more money to charity (i.e., more absolute dollars), Target donated a larger relative amount of money to charity (i.e., percentage of profits). Consumers could construe either retailer as more philanthropic depending on whether they consider the absolute donation magnitudes or the relative proportion of profits donated. Firms vary in their use of these donation frames in public communications, and even third parties publish reports that allow side-by-side comparisons of corporate giving (see

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Greenwood, 2018). However, it is not clear whether consumers attend more to the relative amount of money brands give (e.g., percentage of profits) or the overall dollar amount they donate when judging a brand's generosity. This question is particularly relevant, given increasing emphasis on engaging firms in charitable giving, such as "Pledge 1%,"[1] which asks companies to pledge to donate at least 1% of annual profits, employee time or company equity. In the context of donations, metrics used for measuring generosity vary widely and include both relative and absolute amounts of money given, though the best indicator of generosity often comes down to subjective preference (Meer & Priday, 2021). Thus, understanding what influences consumers' subjective evaluations of generosity is critically important.

We propose that higher relative donations more positively impact consumers' perceptions of brands compared to higher absolute dollar donations. By "relative amount," we mean a proportion of some firm benefit, such as the proportion of profits that a donation reflects. In other words, we predict consumers will prefer brands that donate less in absolute dollars if the donation reflects a higher proportion of profits compared to brands that donate more money overall when it reflects a smaller proportion of profits. We suggest this preference emerges because consumers use the relative size of the donation as a stronger indicator of the brand's generosity than the absolute dollar amount given to charity.

2 Conceptual Background

Consumers often engage in prosocial behaviors, such as donating money to charity, in order to maintain a positive self-image (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Gneezy et al., 2012; Kessler & Milkman, 2018). And, just as personal giving behaviors improve one's self-concept, purchasing cause-related goods also allows buyers to procure feelings of moral satisfaction (Kahneman & Knetsch, 1992) and experience "warm glow" (Andreoni, 1990; Andrews et al., 2014).

Accordingly, a substantial amount of research focuses on examining factors that shape impressions of whether a brand is considered "good" and "moral," and how brands can appear more generous and altruistic without sacrificing the bottom line, or jeopardizing financial health. Research dedicated to this topic has explored moderators of the positive effect of cause sponsorship, such as brand-cause fit (Barone et al., 2007; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004), whether companies donate money or goods (Gershon & Cryder, 2018), perceived brand motives (Barone et al., 2000; Webb & Mohr, 1998), framing of donation pledges (Chang, 2008), and more.

However, one aspect of cause sponsorship that has received little attention, despite its clear financial implications for brands, is whether consumers care more about the absolute amount a brand donates to charity relative to what it is capable of giving (e.g., proportion of profits), or the monetary impact brands have on charitable efforts (i.e., the number of dollars donated). In other words,

[1] Over 12,000 companies from over 100 countries have taken part in the Pledge 1% movement, https://pledgeitforward.today/social-champ-joins-the-pledge-1-movement/, accessed May 2021.

are consumers more impressed by a brand's relative donation magnitudes (e.g., proportion of profits donated) or the absolute dollars given to charity (e.g., total sum of money donated)?

Evidence from economic experimental games, where participants are endowed with money to share with others, suggests that people are more attune to relative amounts offered. Monetary offers perceived as unfairly low in relative terms are often rejected, even when the alternative is to receive nothing (Camerer & Thaler, 1995). Prior work also suggests that self-sacrifice is a larger predictor of perceived generosity relative to more objective metrics, such as dollars donated. For example, prosocial actors are viewed more positively when they abjure self-benefits and highlight personal sacrifice (Lin-Healy & Small, 2013), and people are more willing to contribute to a charitable cause that involves a more painful or effortful process (Olivola & Shafir, 2013). Meanwhile, research on "tainted altruism" asserts that people rate charitable efforts that offer a personal benefit to the actor as less altruistic than equivalent behaviors without any personal benefits (Newman & Cain, 2014).

In the present work, we hypothesize that evaluations of brands' charitable donations will be based less on the impact of the donations and more on the size of these donations *relative to* what the brand is capable of giving. In other words, all else equal, we predict that consumers will prefer brands that donate a smaller amount of money to charity that reflects a larger proportion of profits over brands that donate a higher sum of money reflecting a smaller proportion of profits (H1). We also propose that this preference is driven by changes in perceived generosity. Specifically, we suggest consumers use the relative (vs. absolute) size of donations—which provides a signal of the self-sacrifice made by a firm—as a stronger indicator of generosity and that this sense of generosity drives their brand preference (H2). Ironically, this results in firms that give *less to charity* being judged as *more generous* when they give a greater relative amount compared to another charity.

Interestingly, unlike the absolute size of a donation, the relative size of a donation can be manipulated to be larger or smaller depending on the comparator used to express relative size (e.g., the timeframe of the donation or the pool of money the donations are drawn from). This suggests that firms could manipulate the comparator to make a given (small) donation seem more impressive. One way of artificially constructing a large relative amount is by constraining the time frame in which a donation is made. For example, consider a firm that makes $780,000 per year and donates $15,000 per year. That firm could either express this as 100% of profits for one week, or as approximately 1.9% of profits for one year. In this case, we predict that consumers will view a brand as more generous when it donates, say, 100% of its one-week profits ($15k) relative to when it donates more in absolute dollars (e.g., $19.5k), but expresses it as 2.5% of its yearly profits.

The present research contributes to our understanding of consumer perceptions of charitable brand initiatives. It also adds to the literature on altruism and prosocial decision-making. Further, our investigation provides practical insights that can be readily applied in the marketplace, informing managerial decisions about how to frame charitable activities to consumers.

3 Overview of Studies

We test our hypotheses across five studies (and one study reported in the web appendix). Studies 1a and 1b show that consumers prefer brands that donate more to charity in relative (vs. absolute) terms. Study 2 shows that consumers prefer brands that donate more in relative versus absolute dollars and that they perceive these brands as more generous, despite understanding that larger absolute donations have more impact. Study 3 provides additional evidence of the underlying psychology, showing that consumer preference for brands that donate more money in relative (vs. absolute) terms is driven by perceived generosity. Finally, stemming from our theorizing, study 4 shows that firms can manipulate the comparator for donations (i.e., the timeframe of an initiative or the pool of money donations are drawn from) to make a smaller absolute donation seem more impressive in relative terms.

4 Study 1a

In Study 1a, we documented the basic phenomenon using a consequential choice paradigm and real competing brands.

4.1 Method

Participants (N = 201; 53.73% female; M_{age}= 38.31 years) were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to complete a filler survey soliciting their preferences for different products. At the end of the survey, we told participants that, to thank them for their participation, we would give them a $1 off coupon for one of two ice cream shops of their choosing: Cold Stone Creamery or Baskin-Robbins. We told participants that one of the local ice cream shops donated $12,000 to charity, which reflected 15% of its profits from the last quarter (relative brand), while the other shop donated $23,000, which reflected 7% of its profits from the last quarter (dollar brand). We randomized whether Cold Stone or Baskin-Robbins was described as the relative or dollar brand as well as brand presentation order. After choosing one of the shops, we explained that we would be giving them a $1 MTurk bonus instead of a coupon (as this was easier to implement).

In this and all subsequent studies, participants provided their age and gender. For all studies, sample sizes were set in advance to 100 participants per cell, unless otherwise noted. We report all manipulations and measures, and no data points were excluded. All data, study materials, and preregistrations are available via Research Box (https://researchbox.org/438).

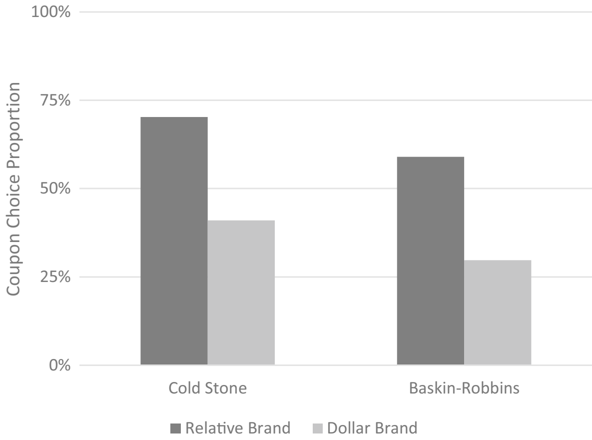


Fig. 1 Study 1 Results: higher relative donations drive coupon choice

4.2 Results and Discussion

Participants were more likely to choose the coupon for Cold Stone when it was described as donating relatively more to charity (70.3%) vs. when it was described as donating a higher absolute amount of money (41%); similarly, participants were more likely to choose the coupon for Baskin–Robbins when it was the relative brand (59%) vs. the dollar brand (29.7%; χ^2 (1) = 17.48, $p < .001$; $\varphi = .295$; see Figure 1). These results provide support for (H1) using a consequential choice paradigm.

5 Study 1b

Study 1b offers a conceptual replication, using a hypothetical brand, a separate evaluation paradigm and a measure of purchase interest.

5.1 Method

Participants (N = 201 on MTurk; 51.74% female, M_{age} = 36.39 years) read about the charitable contributions of a company that had donated to UNICEF. Participants were randomized to either the "relative" or "dollar" firm condition. In the relative firm condition, participants read, "In the past year, Company X has donated $65,000 to UNICEF, which constitutes 21% of the company's profits." In the dollar firm condition, participants read, "In the past year, Company X has donated $94,000 to UNICEF, which constitutes 3% of the company's profits." Next, participants answered the question, "to what extent would you be interested in purchasing something from Company X?" using a seven-point scale (1 = "*Not at all*," 7 = "*Very interested*").

5.2 Results and Discussion

Participants expressed greater interest in purchasing from Company X in the relative vs. dollar firm condition (M_{Relative} = 5.21, *SD* = 1.29; M_{Dollar} = 4.84, SD = 1.33, $t(199) = 1.99$, $p = .05$). Together, the results of Studies 1a and 1b support (H1)—consumers prefer brands that donate more money in relative (vs. absolute) terms.

6 Study 2

In Study 2, we tested for initial evidence of our process account—that consumers perceive brands that donate more to charity in relative (vs. absolute) terms to be more generous. We also assessed whether our effect held despite explicit recognition that the brand that had donated more in relative terms donated less money overall. Thus, we measured perceived impact of the donation—if participants recognize that the brand that donated more in relative terms also donated less in absolute terms, perceived impact should be lower for this brand.

6.1 Method

Participants ($N = 100$ on MTurk; 48% female, M_{age} = 34.3 years) imagined they were shopping for a fitness tracker and were choosing between two different brands. One of the brands, "Brand A" (dollar brand), donated 10% of its profits last year (donating a total of \$83,000) while "Brand B" (relative brand) donated 20% of its profits from the last year (donating a total of \$36,000). Participants indicated which brand they would purchase and, on a new page, rated how generous the brands are and how impactful their donations were (seven-point Likert scales: 1 = "*not at all generous*" to 7 = "*extremely generous*" and 1 = "*not at all impactful*" to 7 = "*very impactful*").

6.2 Results and Discussion

6.2.1 Brand choice

Significantly more than half of participants (65%) said they would purchase the relative brand (Brand B) over the dollar brand (Brand A; $z = 2.9$, $p < .01$).

6.2.2 Perceived generosity, impact, and brand choice

Participants rated the relative brand as more generous (M_{Relative} = 5.84, SD = .99 vs. M_{Dollar} = 4.91, SD = 1.22, $t(99) = 6.64$, $p < .001$) but also as *less* impactful (M_{Relative} = 5.00, SD = 1.21 vs. M_{Dollar} = 5.64, SD = 1.09, $t(99) = 5.74$, $p < .001$).

We regressed participants' brand choice on generosity and impact and found that while perceived generosity of both the dollar brand (β = -.14, $p < .01$) and the relative brand (β = .11, $p = .04$) predicted brand choice, perceptions of impact for both the dollar (β = -.05, $p = .32$) and relative brand donations (β = .09, $p = .08$) did not.

Study 2 provides evidence of our process account, showing that perceived generosity is a driver of consumers' preference for brands that donate more in relative (vs. absolute) dollars. Moreover, these effects occur despite participants' recognition that the relative brand makes a lower objective impact on charity by donating less in absolute dollars.

7 Study 3

Study 3 directly tests whether consumers' preference for brands that donate more in relative (vs. absolute) terms is driven by changes in perceived generosity (H2). We again employed a consequential choice design and used real competing brands that were chosen based on a pretest confirming they are perceived as equally prosocial, profitable, familiar, and likely to be chosen or purchased (see web appendix for pretest details). We preregistered the current study at https://aspredicted.org/uh6hn.pdf.

7.1 Method

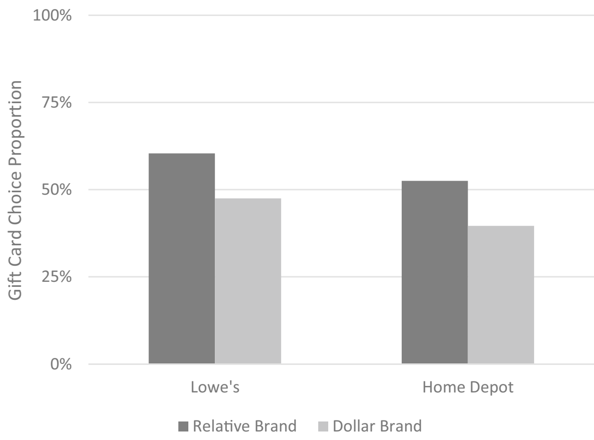
Participants (N = 200 on MTurk; 50.5% female; M_{age} = 40.36 years) followed the same procedure as Study 1a but with different brands, Lowe's and Home Depot, which were randomly described as either the relative (donated $120,000 to charity which reflected 15% of their profits) or dollar (donated $230,000 which reflected 7% of their profits) brand. Participants then indicated whether they would like a $20 gift card for Lowe's or The Home Depot, and, on a new page, how generous they perceived both brands to be, on a 7-point scale (1 = "*not at all generous*" to 7 = "*extremely generous*"). After, we explained to participants that we would enter them in a lottery for a $20 MTurk bonus instead of a gift card.

7.2 Results and Discussion

7.2.1 Gift Card Choice

Participants were more likely to choose the Lowe's coupon when it was the relative brand (60.4%) vs. the dollar brand (47.5%). Similarly, participants were more likely to choose Home Depot when it was the relative brand (52.5%) vs. the dollar brand (39.6%; χ^2 (1) = 3.36, $p = .07$; $\varphi = .13$; see Figure 2).

Fig. 2 Study 3 Results: higher relative donations drive gift card choice



7.2.2 Perceived generosity and brand choice

Participants rated the relative brand as more generous than the dollar brand (M_{Relative} = 5.40, SD = 1.16 vs. M_{Dollar} = 4.73, SD = 1.25; $t(199) = 7.74$, $p < .001$). To test the relationship between perceived generosity and brand preference, we first took the difference of perceived generosity of the absolute brand from that of the relative brand for all participants. Then, using this single measure of perceived generosity, we conducted a binary logistic regression to determine whether the difference in generosity perceptions predicts preferences for the relative vs. absolute brand. The results indicated that the extent to which participants perceived the relative brand as more generous than the absolute brand positively and significantly predicted likelihood of choosing the relative brand over the absolute brand ($\chi 2$ (1, N = 200) = 47.07, $p < .001$); perceived generosity explained 28.1% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in choice. Preregistered mediation results described in the web appendix[2] confirm that the effect of brand donation framing on gift card choice was significantly mediated by perceived brand generosity.

Study 3 supports our process account (H2): consumers perceive brands that donate more in relative (vs. absolute) dollars as more generous, which subsequently predicts brand preferences.

[2] Here we report a complementary analysis, that in hindsight, we think it is more appropriate. Our experimental design necessitated two mediations broken out by brand, however, we ultimately wanted to understand the effect of relative vs. absolute donation framing on generosity and choice, collapsed across the brands.

8 Study 4

Study 4 tests the full process again, plus an implication of our theorizing, which is that firms can manipulate the comparator for donations (e.g., the timeframe of an initiative or the pool of money donations are drawn from) to make a smaller absolute donation seem more impressive in relative terms. We preregistered the study at https://aspredicted.org/ac7m3.pdf.

8.1 Method

Participants (N = 201 on MTurk; 36.3% female, M_{age} = 37.1 years) imagined they were shopping online and saw information about the charitable contributions of "Brand X," which recently concluded a charitable campaign for Feeding America. In a two condition, between-subjects design, participants read that Brand X either donated 100% of profits earned over the last week, which amounted to a total of about $15,000 (relative brand), or 2.5% of profits earned over the last year, which amounted to a total of about $19,500 (dollar brand).[3]

The timing manipulation sets up a situation that might lead participants in the relative firm condition to assume that Brand X donates to Feeding America and/or other causes during other weeks of the year, and so in both conditions, participants also read "This was the only campaign that Brand X ran for Feeding American this year." In addition, as a check at the end of the study, participants were asked to indicate how likely it was that Brand X ran other charitable campaigns this year. After reading about Brand X, participants answered "how generous is Brand X?" using a 7-point scale (1 = "*not at all generous"* to 7 = *"extremely generous*") and then "to what extent would you be willing to purchase something made by Brand X?" (1 = "*not at all willing*" to 7 = "*very willing*"). The study included a manipulation check on a separate page after the DVs that asked participants to recall the timing of the charitable campaign.[4] We also assessed whether participants inferred that relatively more (vs. less) of what they spend is passed on to charity by asking, "If you were to purchase something from Brand X, how much of what you spend do you believe gets passed on to charity?" (slider scale from 0 – 100%).

[3] An added benefit of this design is that it addresses a confound that applies to our earlier studies—the relative brand is always the smaller company (i.e., estimated annual profits are smaller). In this study (Study 4) the estimated size of the firm (i.e., profits over the past year) for each condition is the same.

[4] More participants failed the manipulation check in the relative (29%) vs. dollar brand condition (8%, $p < .01$), however, all results hold even when those who failed the manipulation check are excluded from analyses.

8.2 Results and Discussion

8.2.1 Perceived generosity

Participants rated the relative brand as more generous than the dollar brand ($M_{Relative}$ = 5.86, SD = 1.19, M_{Dollar} = 4.58, SD = 1.31; $t(199) = 7.22$, $p < .001$).

8.2.2 Willingness to purchase

Participants indicated a higher willingness to purchase from the relative vs. dollar brand ($M_{Relative}$ = 5.72, SD = 1.14, M_{Dollar} = 4.91, SD = 1.29; $t(199) = 4.72$, $p < .001$).

8.2.3 Additional Measures

Participants indicated that they believe more of what they spend gets passed on to charity in the relative vs. dollar brand condition ($M_{Relative}$ = 48.44, SD = 37.11, M_{Dollar} = 10.32, SD = 19.01; $t(147.28) = 9.15$, $p < .001$); however, the effect of brand condition on willingness to purchase remains, even when controlling for this belief in a regression model ($B = .48$, SE = .20, $p = .02$). Participants also rated the relative brand as being more likely to run other charitable campaigns for other charities than the dollar brand ($M_{Relative}$ = 4.5, SD = 1.98, M_{Dollar} = 3.79, SD = 1.82; $t(199) = 2.64$, $p < .01$); however, again, the effect of brand condition on willingness to purchase remains, even when controlling for this charitable activity belief in a regression model ($B = .65$, SE = .16, $p < .001$).

8.2.4 Mediation

We used model 4 of the PROCESS macro with 5,000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes, 2018) and found the effect of brand condition on willingness to purchase is significantly mediated by perceived generosity ($ab = .8422$, $SE = .1406$; 95% CI [0.5819, 1.1322]), including when we control for perceptions of the brand's charitable activities as well as for beliefs about how much of what participants spend gets passed on to charity. See web appendix for additional mediation results.

Study 4 again shows that the effect of donation framing on brand preference is driven by generosity and further, that firms can manipulate the comparator for donations (e.g., donation timeframe) to make a smaller absolute donation seem more impressive in relative terms. Given that Study 4 manipulates an additional variable (time course of the charitable initiative), we replicated the results from Study 4 in a preregistered joint evaluation-design wherein consumers could directly compare all three pieces of information: proportion of profits donated, absolute amount of money donated, and time course of the contribution. We report the results of this preregistered replication in the web appendix.

9 General Discussion

Across five studies, we show that consumers prefer brands that donate a smaller amount of money to charity that reflects a larger proportion of profits over brands that donate a greater sum of money that reflects a smaller proportion of profits. We demonstrate that this preference is driven by perceived generosity and persists despite participants' understanding that larger donations have more impact. It also persists in settings where the brand condenses the timeframe of a charitable campaign, making a smaller absolute donation appear more impressive in relative terms. The current research adds to our understanding of how consumers perceive brands that engage in cause-related marketing and cause sponsorship. Moreover, the findings presented here offer practical strategies for brands seeking to maximize the positive brand consequences of cause-related marketing without suffering financially.

While our results support the idea that larger relative (vs. absolute) donations drive perceptions of firm generosity, and in turn affect consumer preferences, there are additional reasons why relative donations might influence consumer impressions in certain contexts. For example, as we found in Study 4, consumers might infer greater personal charitable impact if they purchase from a company that donates a larger relative (vs. absolute) amount of money to charity. And, relatedly, they may infer that a charity that has given more in the past, will continue to give more in the future as well. However, our results suggest that these additional mechanisms do not fully account for the effects in our studies since perceived generosity remains a significant driver, even when controlling for these additional mechanisms.

9.1 Suggestions for Future Research

It would be useful to examine whether consumers sacrifice utility (e.g., by paying more or accepting lower quality; Barone et al., 2000) to consume brands that donate a larger relative (vs. absolute) amount of money to charity. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate downstream consequences for the consumer of purchasing a brand that donates a higher relative (vs. absolute) amount of money to charity. It is possible that purchasing brands that donate more in relative (vs. absolute) dollars might lead consumers to feel licensed to behave less charitably in the future.

It would also be interesting to investigate varied ways that brands might signal generosity. For example, mode of donation may matter; giving in inconvenient, time-consuming, or effortful ways may be seen as more generous and thus preferred by consumers too, even if such efforts are not to the ultimate benefit of the charity. Relatedly, it would be interesting to explore when preferences for higher relative (vs. absolute) donations might reverse, and consumers use absolute donation amounts as a stronger signal of firm generosity. For example, it is possible that interventions that focus consumers on the benefit to the charity, such as the charity communicating a brand's donation rather than the brand announcing it, could shift attention to the absolute donation value over the relative amount.

9.2 Managerial Implications

While our findings may not be surprising, we believe the practical implications of our results are important. First, our findings suggest that programs like "Pledge 1%" may not go over as well as anticipated. While donating 1% is certainly beneficial to charity, it may have the unintended consequence of making a company seem less generous than alternative donation framing. Brand managers can use the knowledge that consumers prefer to maximize relative versus absolute amounts of money brands donate to charity to guide the structure and advertisement of their charitable campaigns. For example, brands can focus on maximizing the relative magnitude of their donations and emphasize how they give more in relative terms compared to their competitors.

Second, our findings suggest that, ironically and perhaps unfortunately, firms can increase goodwill with their customers by being less helpful to charities. For example, firms could reduce donation amounts, but shift the reference point of the denominator (e.g., the timeframe of profits) to appear more impressive. However, we note that brands can also use this information to both their own advantage and to the benefit of the charity. Namely, brands could run multiple short-term charitable campaigns and donate a higher proportion of short-term profits, rather than continuously donate a small proportion of profits annually. This shift in donation framing would allow brands to maximize their perceived generosity and maintain or increase donation levels overall, a win-win for firms and charities alike!

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-021-09608-1.

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